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Lack of Information Led U.S. To Overestimate Missile Lag

Soviet Advances Became Major Intelligence Target in Early 1950s

SECOND OF A SERIES

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AT THE MOMENT, THE UNITED STATES has more than 800 fully armed intercontinental ballistic missiles deployed on launchers, 600 of them Minutemen and almost all in "hardened" (underground, concrete) silos dispersed over an area of more than 100,000 square miles, from New York state to California.

An accounting of how and why this technological accomplishment came about is the story of the nonexistent "missile gap."

As World War II neared an end, the Soviet Union, Britain and the United States acquired all of the German technical data and military devices they could. The Russians did particularly well because their army overran most of Germany's rocket production and assembly facilities.

The director of Germany's Pennemunde rocket center, Maj. Gen. Walter Dornberger, and Wernher von Braun, who worked on Germany's V2 missile program, surrendered to United States forces rather than be taken by Soviet troops.

The Dornberger - Von Braun team of 130 scientists and engineers, together with valuable documents, parts and scientific reports, arrived in the United States in the summer of 1945. But the war was over and the United States did not feel the need, or the desire, to establish a single high-priority missile program.

HOWEVER, Allen Dulles, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, recalls that "by 1952-53, the missile situation in the Soviet Union became one of our major intelligence targets. Every effort was made to interview returning Germans whom the Russians had been able to hire."

Jerome Wiesner, former science adviser to President John F. Kennedy, was "first conscious" of the missile in the summer of 1952. He recalls: "I heard a briefing by an Air Force officer, in which he described something that resembled the Empire State Building and estimated it would take the Soviets until 1965 to develop it, so that we need not be concerned for a long time."

In the 1950s, missile [illegible] sion in the United States split into what Dulles called "a dichotomy of skeptics and believers."

Among the latter were John van Neumann of the Princeton University Institute for Advance Studies and Trevor Gardner, who early in 1953 was appointed special assistant secretary for research and development for the Air Force. Gardner immediately addressed priority efforts to the missile.

IT WAS Gardner who established the Strategic Missiles Evaluation Committee, which came to be known as the Teapot Committee. Von Neumann was chairman and Wiesner one of its 11 members. By the winter of 1953 this group was convinced that the United States could build an ICBM in four to six years and that the Russians had a lead of several years.

The Teapot Committee believed that the nation was in grave danger and called for an aggressive missile effort that President Dwight D. Eisenhower "backed to the hilt," in the words of one member.

Laboratory experiments had convinced the Von Neumann committee that the next U. S. nuclear test series, in the summer of 1953, would produce (and it did) a much lighter bomb. If so, the payload, instead of being 10,000 to 12,000 pounds, would need to be only 3000 to 4000 pounds. This would negate the Air Force argument that a missile would be hard to build because it would have to contain a huge nuclear-fission bomb.

LT. GEN. James M. Gavin (ret.), former Army missile chief, recalls:

"The manned bomber, in the days of Hiroshima and before, had been tremendously effective and some still had blind faith in it. But by the time of the middle 1950s, I had been to Korea to study the war we almost lost—and historians may say we did lose it—and its 147,000 casualties.

"The Nike-Ajax (missile) system was beginning to appear; in my opinion, it neutralized the bomber's effective striking power.

"By 1956, it was recommended to us that we go for an IRBM (medium - range missile) because we thought they had ICBMS (long-range missiles) and this was the best thing we could do in a hurry."

At this point, in July 1956, the U-2, an American aircraft that can take 4000 pictures of a strip 125 miles wide and 2174 miles long from a height of 60,000 to 70,000 feet, began to fly over the Soviet Union.

In the words of Dulles: "We gained, rather quickly, extraordinary results from photographing their major base and the complex around it. After that, we were able to watch its development with reasonable accuracy. Other Air Force detection methods also were developed, permitting more accurate monitoring of test firings.

"However, when they were shooting only 3000 miles, we felt they probably could shoot a greater distance, but that they were running out of land in the Kamchatka and Siberian areas, and probably could not monitor efficiently a longer shot."

THE GAITHER committee, established by Eisenhower, was trying to decide when the Russians might be likely to have a large number of missiles. One former member says: "The consensus was 1960, for an operational missile force. We thought it would take us two years longer, so we were at a serious disadvantage."

On Aug. 26, 1957, the Soviet news agency Tass announced the launching of a long-range ballistic missile.

U.S. intelligence responded, in the words of Dulles, by "sounding the alarm."

The Russians fired three satellites between Oct. 4, 1957, and May 11, 1958, the last being Sputnik III, weighing 2926 pounds, contrasted with three of our shots that had payloads of only 21, 28 and 3.25 pounds.

A rocket vehicle capable of launching a heavy satellite is not precisely the same thing as an ICBM, but military authorities conceded that when the Russians had solved problems of guidance, re-entry and production, they could reach anywhere in the United States with an ICBM launched from the Soviet Union.

By this time it was accepted in the United States that nothing could stop the Russians from achieving an intercontinental missile with a 5000-mile range.

VON BRAUN was convinced that if the United States had kept up a stepped-up Pennemunde operation, it could have had an ICBM by 1950. Obviously, if the United States could have had one that early, the Russians certainly could have one eight years later. National composure was not helped by an intelligence study of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization that said the Soviet Union had ICBMs with nuclear warheads "in operational quantities." The report said that Red missile forces numbered 200,000 men at about 100 bases.

At one point, the United States estimated that the Russians could produce as many as 10,000 missiles in a year's time. (Present stockpiles indicate how ridiculous this figure was; the United States is producing one Minuteman missile per day.) This estimate was based on an intelligence evaluation, in turn based on Russian production capacity.

Principally because of lack of information and because the United States thought missiles were easier to make than it is now known they are, it accepted the grim picture of a massive, hard-driving Russian program far ahead of ours.

Tomorrow: The role of the U-2 and Samos II.